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ABSTRACT

This paper shows that, although a digital divide exists between developed and developing countries, the development of information technology (IT) and the Internet has had a profound political, social, and economic impact on developing countries. IT and the Internet revolution are shaping the world into new polarized entities due to the uneven distribution of wealth, physical development, and literacy. The unequal distribution of wealth has not only impeded the acquisition of IT and the Internet for developing countries, but also created a real danger that IT and the Internet will exacerbate the existing digital divide. The political and socio-economic scenario in Malaysia has been affected by the emergence of IT and Internet. At the beginning of the new millennium under its Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia appears to be standing on a double-edged sword. With the inauguration of his brainchild, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), Mahathir is facing an uphill task in his political career and reputation. The paradox is that, while Mahathir's administration is a strong advocate of IT and Internet in the interest of economic development, it fears the erosive effects on political control and influence. In short, IT and Internet are a dream as well as a nightmare. Mahathir has promoted IT, but now IT seems to be one of the reasons for his waning power. (Contains 20 references.) (Author/MES)

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The double edged sword : a brief comparison of it and Internet development in Malaysia and some few neighboring countries in the context of digital divide

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to show that although there exists a digital divide between the developed and the developing countries the development of IT and Internet has had a profound political social and economic impact on developing countries.

Information Technology (IT) and Internet revolution are shaping the world into new polarized entities owing to the uneven distribution of wealth, physical development and literacy. Not only unequal distribution of wealth has for developing countries impeded the acquisition of IT and Internet there is a real danger that IT and Internet themselves WILL exacerbate the existing divide between developed and developing countries.

The political and socio- economic scenario in Malaysia has been affected by the emergence of IT and Internet for the better or worse. Malaysia at the beginning of the new millenium under its Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad appears to be standing on a double edged-sword. With the inauguration of his brain child, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), Mahathir is facing an uphill task in his political career and reputation. The paradox is that is while Dr. Mahathir's administration is a strong advocate of IT and Internet in the interest of economic development it fears the erosive effects on political control and influence. In short the IT and Internet are both a dream as well as a nightmare. Mahathir initiates and pushes the nation into IT, but now IT seems to be one of the reasons for his waning power.

1.0 Introduction

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One of the most astounding phenomena in the past millenium is the emergence of sophisticated technological inventions. Research into telecommunication, biotechnology and other technologies have been followed by the development of products which have become responsible for both comfort and chaos, to nature and its inhabitants.
The introduction of computer technology is one of the most important developments in the second half of the last century. The computer which arrived late in the second millenium has not only become the supplement for nearly every aspects of human socio-economic endeavors but emerged has as 'a craze' for a new generation. The Personal Computer (PC) has become a mass commodity in the early 1980s in some parts of the world, transforming human life styles, ushering mankind from modernism to post industrial era and cyber era. Towards the end of the second millenium, nearly allexisting communication sectors embraced cyber technology in varying degrees thereby creating a great potential for cyber- oriented products and services.

Coming not so long after the emergence of PC, The Internet has created 'a border less world' a platform for mankind to interact, share knowledge with astonishing ease. As a result, interaction and communication from one corner of the globe to another can take place within seconds. With such potential for speed, comfort, accuracy at relatively 'affordable', cost, many people believed the world would be wholly 'cyberized' within a decade. Undeniably, the potentials of Internet or IT are so great that it is hard for any country to resist its invasion, be it small or big, rich or poor. Countries moving slowly in acquainting with IT and cyber products face a threat of being left behind economically in the near future in comparison to those who are giants in the cyber arena.
However, the relevant question to ask is; to what extent has the dream of a fully cyberized world has been fully realized?

2.0 Global Atmosphere and IT Ownership

The truth is that a transformation of the whole world into a "cyber platform" with nearly every human being transformed into 'cyber participants' has not materialize as predicted by many leading figures in the IT world a decade ago. The demand for IT products has simply not matched the global supply and information technologies have not reached every human being as predicted by some people simply because the PC is yet to reach an affordable price for most people particularly those living in the developing countries.

The PC is still seen as a luxury item for many groups of people around the globe. The fact is that in poor countries the PC is available and utilized only by some elite groups who are wealthy.

How Many On line?
The task of estimating how many are online throughout the world is an inexact one at best. Surveys abound, using all sorts of measurement parameters. However the following is an " educated guess" as to how many are online worldwide as of November 2000.

Africa	3.11 million
Asia/Pacific	104.88 million
Europe	113.14 million
Middle East	2.40 million
Canada & USA	167.12 million
Latin America	16.45 million
World Total	407.1 million

Source : *Various; Methodology*

Complied by : *Nua Internet Surveys* (http://www.nua.ie/surveys/how_many_online/index.html)

At one United Nations summit where heads of state and government ministers gathered in Geneva in 2000 it was highlighted that 88 percent of the world's Internet users live in the industrial countries, only 0.3 percent in the poorest countries of the world. (Source: The Star (In-Tech) vol.9, no.27, 4 July 2000, p.2)

The UN Development Program (UNDP) notes that between 2000 and 2001 the world will have about 700 million Internet users compared to 50 million in 1997. Contemplating these numbers, it is evident that the population of Internet users has yet to reach even 10 percent of the world's 6 billion population in the near future.

Various reasons can be attributed to the slow evolution of IT globally. The dominant constraint has been the imbalance of the 'socio-economic' structure of the world. In a world where nations are still categorized as 'rich nations' or 'poor nations'; 'literate' or 'illiterate' society, 'developed', 'under developed' or 'developing' nations etc., it is only to be expected that such disparities will have a fundamental effect on the spread of IT and Internet globally. (see illustration below)

The 1997 UNDP Report reveals the growing chasm between the rich and poor countries in our planet today. The rich nations' constitute 20 percent of the global population but possess 80 percent of the world's wealth. The poorer nations which constitute 80 percent of the world's population enjoy only a small part of the global wealth. In such an unequal world the goal of cyberizing the world must still remain a distant dream. Rich nations like USA, Japan, Britain, France, Canada, and Netherlands etc. can definitely

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provide a PC to each of its citizen but unfortunately for nations like Siera Leone, Niger, Ethiopia, Burkin, Burundi, Mozambique, Eritrea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali etc. etc. IT and cyber phenomenon is still a fantasy.

In the first place poor countries cannot easily put into place the telecommunications infrastructure necessary for accessing the Internet. Wireless technology, satellite or mobile phones among other technologies remain the privilege of he few in many countries. For example, a computer costs the average Bangladeshi more than eight years' income while the American spends just a month's wages. Using the Internet for one hour in Chad in 1999 cost US 10.50 while the average yearly salary of its citizen is US $187. The high cost of access to cyberspace in these countries, which have generally very low personal incomes, restrict usage of the Web.

Apart from the above the following statistics below convey more stark picture of the world.

- About 1.3 billion people are poor, living on less than US$ 1.00 a day
- One in four people in developing countries and one in eight in developed countries is affected by human poverty.
- Almost 1.3 billion people do not have access to clean water
- Developing countries have 60 % more illiterate women than men.

Source: **UNDP Malaysian Office** (New Sunday Times, July 18,1999, p.13)

Bill Gates at an IT conference in November 2000 in Redmond, Washington spoke passionately about how the internet was of little use to the world's poor. He said " The world's poor two billion people desperately need health care, not laptops, or wireless Internet connections or a bridge across digital divide.
In other words not all countries have the same opportunity to access technological and scientific progress. The growing power of the Internet also risks widening the divide between the world's haves and have-nots. In fact the digital divide is getting deeper between countries as most of the world is still without any access to the World Wide Web (WWW). The difference is showing up not only between rich and poor countries but also between rich and poor citizens within a country.

3.0 IT and the restrictive policies in some Asian countries

Apart from the socio-economic constraints that have hampered a smooth transition of IT and Internet globally, another great constraint on the development of IT and Internet in developing countries has been domestic policies which have crippled the free media. The media being one of the most crucial medium for enlightening the population of all nations has often kept closed and controlled by the ruling elites in these countries. On the one hand can be a potent instrument for accelerating broad based growth and sustainable development and to some for reducing poverty. The IT and Internet both can be a double-edged sword for some governments in the developing countries. On the other hand it allows any citizens to access an unprecedented degree of freedom of speech and this freedom can constitute a threat to the government.

Indonesia, India, Thailand, Philippines and Malaysia are examples of five Asian countries which have permitted the free flow of information through the IT and Internet. There is no censorship on the Internet in those countries. Apart from these cases most of the other Asian countries have responded to Information Communication Technology (ICT) in one way or another.

One response to the new IT has been to prohibit its acquisition by private citizens. This has been the approach of the more authoritarian regimes like North Korea and Myanmar which have banned the Internet altogether.

In Burma " Sales of computers are growing rapidly in Myanmar's otherwise sluggish economy. The 100-member Myanmar Computer Federation estimates that there are more than 50,000 computers in this land of 48 million people (approximately 1 per 960), one of the world's poorest. But networking between those computers and the outside world is still forbidden A 1996 law imposes a 7 to 15 years jail term for the unauthorized ownership of a modem. Burma remains one of the most heavily censored country in the world " (http;//www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue6 5/krebs/index.html)

The other response adopted by governments such as Singapore and China has been to control the use of Internet in varying degrees.

Singapore stands tall as one of the leading Internet users in the world with 45 percent of its population owning PCs. It has one of the most sophisticated communication web called Singapore ONE (One Network for Everyone). Yet the Internet is monitored and censored and it is not 'free', 'private' and 'transparent' as hailed by the pioneers and founders of Internet. In 1999 it was reported that the IT Security Unit of Singapore's Ministry of Home Affairs had monitored approximately 200,000 personal e-mails of its citizens for 'irregularities' in 1999. When The Sydney Morning Herald (dated 29 April 2000) exposed THIS scandalous state of affairs the Singapore government responded by claiming this was a normal procedure to check virus infection ! With many restrictions by the Singapore Government it is open to question whether the quantity of PC acquisition is a measure of real development.
Under the Singapore Broadcasting Act (SBA), Internet content providers are automatically licensed and given a clear directives as to what their responsibilities are. The Internet users may be required by the broadcasting authority to limit public access to 100-200 sites which the SBA considers "undesirable."

Recently Singapore introduced a new law of censorship. The new legislation is an amendment to Section 42 of the 1994 Broadcasting Authority Act. This law attempts to limit critical debate and permit the Singapore Government to declare that any foreign broadcasting service is " engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore " though the Act does not define what " engaging in domestic politics " involves. Fines up to Singapore $ 100,000 may be levied on those found guilty of contravening the new regulations.

China with 16.9 million Internet users (or 1.34 percent of its more than one billion population) is subjecting to government regulation. China makes sure that all web sites are registered with the government. Last year China passed a law on Internet crime which provides for a crack down on political dissent. It launched regulations that made web sites responsible for ensuring that users are not critical of government policy. The Chinese government wants to ensure that its Internet users do not post messages deemed "illegal" that is to say is anything against the constitution or that that "harms China's honor and interest" China's Ministry of Public Security said 1,000 Internet crimes were reported in the first six months of 2000, the same number throughout the whole of 1999.

In Indonesia it is important to observe that ex- President Suharto came to power in the midst 1960's in blood bath which resulted the slaughter of at least half a million people. He also detained without trial more than 100,000 writers, artisans, unionist and other dissidents and prohibited them from producing or promoting any form of dissent for nearly more than a decade. However, Suharto relaxed his grip when the imperatives of rapid development forced him to permit the growth of IT and Internet in Indonesia. Internet came to Indonesia in the midst of 1990s. The rapid growth of IT and its supplementary technologies ENABLED the intelligentsia to become aware the corruption of the Suharto regime. Although the number of IT users is relatively small (Indonesia has 400,000 Internet users and this amounts to 0.18 percent of the 220 million population) nonetheless it played an important role in the reformation struggle. Although it was the Asian crisis which finally spelt the doom of Suharto of his military regime the process of his

downfall was in no small measure assisted by the presence of a small but influential IT literate intelligentsia. Pro democracy movement especially the students used e-mails to coordinate their demonstration and other actions.

Philippines, a nation well known for its 'people's power' movements provides more space for free expression compared to its other neighbors. It is moving to construct a sophisticated information infrastructure. There in no Internet censorship In Philippines. A country of contrasts, the Philippines has had a long tradition of subscribing to the trappings of a liberal democracy. The Philippines is also a country without secrets, even when the dictator Marcos declared martial law. This tradition has gone over to the Internet. The only dampers perhaps are the country's laws on libel and sedition.
Philippines has 500,000 Internet users, about 0.62 percent of the total population.

At the height of anti Estrada movement from October 2000 to January 2001, several web sites promoting the ouster the President on the Internet. News groups were launched for this purpose too. The Internet served as the repository for intellectual justification for the ouster of a President whom the middle and upper classes saw as corrupt, incompetent, immoral, and leading the country into an economic abyss.

Nevertheless, the effects of the Internet had to interface with other new media as well as traditional media. The other new media was cellular phone texting. This served to call the middle and upper classes to gather at EDSA. But they would not have really been aroused if they had not been disgusted with what they saw of Estrada's impeachment trial on television and by what they read in the broad sheet newspapers.

4.0 The Case of Malaysia - The Double Edged Sword

Comparatively Malaysia and its policies towards IT and Internet would seem to be much more like than a few countries like Myanmar, North Korea and China. Furthermore Malaysia is clearly ahead of many countries in terms of personal computer ownership, Internet usage (quantity) and in 'value usage of Internet'.

The Internet first made its debut in Malaysia in 1996. Since then Malaysia with a population of 22 million have five Internet Service Providers (ISP) with about 2 million Internet users. Malaysia has a fairly high level of computer usage and ownership in comparison with neighboring countries. Malaysia also has been a strong advocate of IT and the Internet. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, the Prime Minister has an ambitious plan to transform Malaysia into an information technology center. Thus resulted in the establishment of Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) at the cost of $ 20 billion dollars. Although in many respects Mahathir's regime does not differ much to that of Lee Kuan Yew's in terms of the curtailment of freedom and civil liberties, development has taken a different course, thanks to the ICT. The motive of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in establishing the MSC was primarily to take full advantage of ICT for the purposes of accelerating the economic development. However to attract and secure foreign investments to make MSC a success Mahathir has been forced to guarantee that there would be no censorship of the Internet. As a result Malaysia is unable to exercise that sort of censorship that Singapore has been practicing. Moreover because of this guarantee Malaysian government is unable to adopt the sort of censorship measures which it exercises over the non- electronic media in the country.
The MSC, a large zone stretching 750 square kilometer was built as an attempt to create an Asian version of the Silicon Valley. This 750 square kilometer zone which runs from the glistening Petronas Twin Tower in Kuala Lumpur to the new international airport 60 kilometers to the south. The Corridor already contains Putrajaya, the government's new administrative center; Cyberjaya, an industrial park for high technology and software companies; and a Stanford-style Multimedia University that receives guest lecturers from such high-tech giants as Lucent technologies. The project started in the mid-1990s was to take two decades

to finish. It promised fiber-optic networks, research facilities, tax breaks, and new "cyber laws" to any multinational setting up shop. Malaysia intends to provide the best incubator on the planet for high-tech businesses and create an environment in which a native high-tech industry could take root and boost the country into the ranks of developed nations by 2020.
In Malaysia the ruling party has kept a control over the non-electronic media. Mainstream newspapers as well as television channels are owned or controlled by the governing coalition parties. Given this scenario new political forces released by the Internet have created dilemma for the political establishment. All disgruntled elements within the political spectrum have channeled and sent through the Internet. The proliferation of web sites critical of the government has increased. The Internet serves as an important alternative media in Malaysia and provides space for the pro-opposition views and news. To date the government has been unable to do anything to curb this tendency effectively. As Malaysians become more educated their desires to seek things out for themselves and this often leads them to clash with authority. Every new form of communication riles authority, and the Internet is no exception.

Oblivious the power and speed of Internet, Mahathir underestimated the growth of the opposition to his ousted Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim and his reformation agenda which started in 1998. Prior to the emergence of Internet, Mahathir could overcome nearly every crisis by controlling the 'authentic' news and information reaching the public. He thought that given the government's control of the non-electronic media he anticipated that Anwar's refomation's struggle would die off soon - a tradition among the Malaysians who are known to have very short memories.

Such an anticipation would have come true if there had been no ICT in Malaysia.But, in 1998 personal computer and Internet was already being a 'craze' among Malaysians especially among the teenagers and middle class society in general. Even those Malaysians who had no PCs could access the news of the opposition through the government computerisation of the government departments and services. Here it was possible to gain access information sent by the reformation groups. In this way the reformation groups manage to rally their supporters and help keep the flow of information going. Mass gatherings were successful, thanks to IT and Internet.
Although the non-electronic main stream media was still under government control, the trust and respect of the Malaysian people had diminished towards them. When Malaysian began comparing the information of non-electronic main stream media with Internet many Malaysians for the first time felt they had been misled and began to lose their faith in the official media. A skeptical attitude towards main non-electronic main stream media began to develop their minds. Now, even though flaws and untruth elements do also exist in cyber based sites, many Malaysians regard them as more authentic and trustworthy than the non-electronic main stream media information.

Malaysiakini.com, Laman Reformasi, Freeanwar.com, Harakahdaily.com and *FreeMalaysia.com* are five out of the fifty over web sites which give alternative news coverage. They are visited by more than 250, 000 visitors daily. In addition to such web pages are 'e-groups' discussion platform. Another major advantage of the Internet is its interactivity – its ability to gather information about voters: their likes , dislikes and attitudes. In Malaysia opposition opinions sped across the Net; sites to offer the juiciest rumors or truths or facts on corrupt business deals and personal scandals involving the government. Because of the vacuum for a platform for intellectual discussion in Malaysia the Internet has become a haven for those Malaysia who longed to voice their long, long repressed opinions and ideas. *Sangkancil@malaysia.net* is one of the many electronic discussion groups which has earned a great reputation for intellectual discussion ranging from politics, religion, race, culture and nationalism.

The political tumult of the late 1980s which resulted from the constitutional crisis after sacking the Lord President Salleh Abbas was unable to garner much popular support for opposing views in spite of it

triggering more opposition from within the governing parties than the unceremonious sacking of heir apparent Anwar Ibrahim. This was to some extent due to the lack of alternative channels of information dissemination a decade ago. The Internet has been credited with playing a pivotal role in sustaining the current reform movement. The world wide web has helped in facilitating dissent in Malaysia by providing a means by which information can be disseminated in a heavily-regulated media environment. The reform movement though at its nascent stage has been able to sustain itself and mobilize grassroots support due to alternative news and analysis available through the Internet. The sacking of Anwar Ibrahim unleashed a "revolution " which brought about a drastic change in the way Malaysians view politics and politicians, and a shift from the politics of personalities to political issues. The belief that the government was invincible is now gone. People dare to speak about an alternative government and toy with the idea of changing the government. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad is struggling very hard to recover his support.

The Internet provides views and call for many important issues such as the call for freedom of speech, assembly and the press, independence of the judiciary, abolishment of draconian laws, an effective police force and the abolishment of cronyism, nepotism and corruption. These pertinent issues are not allowed to be questioned or discussed in main stream media. Hence, when the public are enlightened to such alternative views via the Internet, Internet had turned savior. The Internet has broken this monopoly of control over free expression.

5.0 Conclusion

Access to the Internet will for a long time remains something available only to the elite groups in developing countries. However as shown above despite this ICT can have a profound impact on political development in particular in opening up new avenues for expression of popular dissent. Today IT is Malaysia which is experiencing the impact of IT revolution, but other regimes such as Singapore and China should bear in mind that they cannot avoid the inevitable impact of this revolutionary technology on their society. They have no other course other than to loosen their grip on their media and make room for dissent

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